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AGAINST FATE AND FORTUNE

The Ethics of Agency in Books 1-6 of Statius' *Thebaid*

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Fate succumbs
many a species: one alone
jeopardises itself.

- W.H. Auden

Statius' *Thebaid*, a Roman retelling of the Oedipus myth, owes much to its literary forebears. The central tale this epic explores is borrowed from an ancient source: Greek accounts of unlucky Oedipus and his unhappy offspring.[1] But Statius' first-century rendering is not a carbon copy of its antique precedents, and the *Thebaid*'s treatments of fate, fortune, and human agency diverge distinctly from those of its most immediate narrative parallels. Indeed, it is in the poem's departure from the causal framework of these assorted sources that its author's influence is most clear.

Throughout the epic's early books, the doubled determinism of Statius' literary inheritance gives way to a glimmer of ethical independence for creator and character alike. This mirroring effect—the author's compositional agency is employed to endow his actors with more expansive moral options[2]—serves within the text both to ennoble autonomy and condemn those individuals unwilling or unable to eschew inauspicious pasts. And while the poem's predetermined end leaves little room for autochthonous action (Statius' loyalty to his sources is incomplete but not absent), the *Thebaid*'s first six books provide readers with a compelling roadmap to an alternative arena of human conduct. By adopting and adapting narrative features evident in the works of Aeschylus, Apollodorus, and others, the *Thebaid*'s creator crafts a moral message of his own.[3]

Statius' subversiveness is subtle and cumulative, scattered throughout the poem's pages, an authorial endeavor made visible only gradually. First apparent is an ambiguous discussion of scale and scope; following closely on its heels is a depiction of impetuous divinity, a survey of Oedipus himself, and the introduction of various clashing characters. The *Thebaid*'s first two books are fundamentally dialogic, functioning first to set forth an array of ethical mechanisms through which the rest of the epic may be understood.[4] These interpretive lenses are met in Books III through VI with an insight into the author's own argumentative allegiances: it is here that Statius' characters are fully fleshed, elevated or undercut in accordance with both their independence[5] and their more substantive moral convictions.

[1] I wish to thank Seán Murphy, Professor of Medieval Studies at Western Washington University, for creating the intellectual space in which this paper was conceived.

[2] In breaking with *lineal* tradition, various characters establish an alternate moral path; in breaking with *literary* tradition, Statius constructs his own framework of fate and agency. It is through this rejection of precedent that the *Thebaid* paves a way for its characters to pursue similar projects.

[3] The majority of this paper's analytical attention will be directed towards an inquiry into the internal aspects of Statius' epic. Documentation of the author's divergence from mythical tradition is only a secondary, though salient, concern.

[4] In another formulation: Books I-III raise concerns that are then substantiated in Books III-VI.

[5] Or lack thereof.

1. INTRODUCTORY FRAMEWORKS

"Brothers crossing swords," begins the epic. "[H]eld by turns, their kingdom, vied for in fiendish hatred, the guilt of Thebes—these my mind, struck by Pierian fire, burns to unfold."[6] The poet, uncertain, calls to his muse for compositional counsel: should he "sing of the dire race and its origins— / Sidonian rapes, the merciless terms of exile imposed / by Agenor's law, Cadmus scouring the seas for Europa?" Here, the depravity of Thebes would appear historical or perhaps even transhistorical; in his search for the origins of Oedipus' crime Statius invokes

> A long series, if I trace events back to that plowman
> trembling at covert foes, sowing combat in unholy
> ground; if I dig deep to find what notes Amphion plucked,
> coaxing Tyrian stones to approach and build a bulwark;
> if I strive to learn why Bacchus raged at familial walls,
> what role savage Juno played, at whom unfortunate
> Athenaeus aimed his bow, why Palaemon's mother
> had no qualms, leaping with him into the vast Ionian Sea.[7]

If these names and events are unfamiliar to the reader expecting a straightforward recounting of Oedipus' tragic tale, it is because Statius' proposed portrait of the episode's roots entails an examination of its accursed protagonist's earliest (and unhappiest?) ancestors. If this is to be Statius' narrative framework, the state of the present involves the ills of all time.

The *Thebaid*'s second paragraph introduces another option, a potential that is once again both artistic and philosophical. Instead of "trac[ing] events back to that plowman / trembling at covert foes", Statius declares that he will "let Cadmus' groans / and good fortune go; the confines of my song shall be the confused House of Oedipus."[8] Though the shift is subtle—the author trades an interminable history for a merely long one—this choice carries no small measure of significance. In limiting his scope Statius implies something critical about the relative importance of an ill-omened past and the actions of its inheritors in the present.[9] The poet explores or entertains other options *and rejects them*, settling instead on a scale that permits a greater degree of attention paid to the actions and decisions of individual characters. The weight of history will dog the tale throughout, but this critical choice on scope and subject provides the fundamental literary necessities for an agency-focused exegesis.[10] Statius' work is indeed no

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[6] Publius Papinius Statius and Jane Wilson Joyce, *Thebaid: A Song of Thebes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), I.1-2.
[7] Statius, *Thebaid,* I.7-10.
[8] Statius, *Thebaid,* I.15-7.
[9] And sets the precedent for a pattern evident throughout the epic.
[10] Whether this introductory framework is a sufficient condition for ethical action among the epic's now-visible actors remains to be seen.

straightforward retelling, but its departure from tradition leads in a direction opposite that implied by Book I's opening outline.

This initial discussion does not, however, indicate unambiguous intent. Rather than a definitive rejection of convention, such passages (taken by themselves) serve primarily as dramatized windows into the poet's process of compositional calibration. Similarly doubtful dynamics are at play in Statius' first mention of Oedipus himself: while it is by no means orthodox, this invocation's implications not so clear as to 'prove' complete authorial independence.

In destroying "[h]is impious eyes," the poet relates, "Oedipus had plunged his guilty shame in night / everlasting and now held his soul in a lingering death".[11] Standard emphases appear to be present: as in Apollodorus' account, it is due to Oedipus' guilt at having "married his mother" that the Theban "put out his eyes and was driven from [his city]."[12] But although this initial understanding appears unremarkable, there are hints—as with the *Thebaid*'s very first lines—that something more significant is afoot. Apollodorus' *Library of Greek Mythology* emphasizes the ignorance (thus innocence?) of Oedipus, the redemptive quality of his self-injury. For Apollodorus, human tragedy takes center stage, but the poetic justice of Statius' reckoning involves an accent placed on wrath. In the *Thebaid*, Oedipus lacks contrition: even his most abnegatory acts are said to stem from a "greed [...] for punishment".[13] (Oedipus' cursing of his sons also proceeds in spite of the *knowledge* that "it's twisted"[14]—contra Apollodorus, who presents the Theban's curse as a grief-stricken outgrowth of his unknowing incest and its reception by his sons.[15]) For Statius, Oedipus' eyelessness is merely the prelude to another unjust, iniquitous act.[16]

This abject lack of sympathy is not, even for Statius, universal—and the Roman's treatment of his various characters is not, as may be expected, entirely uniform. As addressed in sections 4 and 5 below, the relative elevation of various actors is a significant component of Statius' larger project. But these early explorations are not so conclusive; what emerges here serves only to raise the specter or possibility of

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[11] Statius, *Thebaid*, I.46-8.
[12] Apollodorus and Robin Hard, *The Library of Greek Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), III.5-6 (pp.106-7). Apollodorus is a much later source than Aeschylus (and may indeed post-date Statius), but his easily accessible anthology of Greek myth provides an informative view into the state of popular Roman readings (i.e., perspectives) around the time of Statius' life.
[13] Statius, *Thebaid*, I.71.
[14] Statius, *Thebaid*, I.56.
[15] I.e., offspring "who watched [Oedipus] being expelled from [Thebes] without coming to his aid"). See *Apollodorus*, Library, III.6.
[16] This filial curse is cast in full awareness of its injustice. If Statius' presentation of Oedipus' original sin precludes (like Apollodorus') the possibility of premeditated action, his take on this portion of the Theban's crime certainly does not. The god Jupiter's understanding of Oedipus' actions is even more explicit in its assignation of intent: to him, Oedipus was an "impious heir" who "even hungered to clamber into his father's bed and defile his innocent [as opposed to Oedipus?] mother's womb, to thrust his way [...] back to his own begetting" (I.235). (See section 2 of this study for more on Jupiter's larger role.)

narrative divergence and individual guilt. Statius' Oedipus may be angrier, guiltier than his Greek counterpart, but the foundational facts of the Theban's tale remain as-yet unaltered.[17]

Statius' second take on these compound concerns is best broached via examination of his core protagonists' initial introductions.[18] Having adjusted his epic's parameters to the scale of individual lives, the poet proceeds to interweave adapted character sketches into the question their portrayal entails.[19] The manner in which Polynices (one of Oedipus' cursed sons) and Tydeus (Polynices' comrade-in-arms) present themselves to an unfamiliar agent, the King of Argos, exemplifies one of the poem's earliest and most pointed interactions with the problem of transmitted culpability.

Issues raised in the epic's opening lines are complicated and elaborated by this new narrative focus. After his departure from Thebes,[20] Polynices wanders the shores of Aonia;[21] obsessive, he fixates on a single question: "[w]hen will he see his brother step down from the throne / [and] find himself master of Thebes and all her might?"[22] The results and implications of Polynices' paternal past are an eternal psychological present; for him, there is no water under the bridge. He proceeds nevertheless, making his way towards Argos where the king Adrastus, "veering towards old age, ruled his people".[23] Polynices' friendship with the Olenean Tydeus is quickly established (see lines I.408-32), and these twinned exiles set off to explain their unexpected presence at the Argive court.

As Statius informs his audience at line 110, Tydeus is himself associated with historical baggage. The same sentence which describes a deepening bond between Polynices and Tydeus also indicates that Tydeus has been "stained by his brother's blood." Against all expectations, the Olenean is unabashed: in an act of supreme self-confidence, he asserts to Adrastus that "you'll know me for one born of the great Oenus' stock and no shame to my ancestor Mars!"[24] Despite his status as a fratricide, Tydeus presents his past sans shame.[25]

Polynices is not so bold. "I too am able to boast of my spirit and stock", he begins, but falters shortly thereafter.[26] The insecurity hidden behind his compulsive self-questioning intercedes and, "keenly aware

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[17] See sections 4 and 5 for the contents of this qualifier. A more thorough understanding of Statius' theme requires attention paid to other aspects of the epic.
[18] Odeipus' opening portrait is already accounted for, but the rest of the cast remains to be seen.
[19] 'Entails' by way of the binary framework discussed above. A scope small enough to address the actions of individuals is presented as the mutually exclusive *alternative* to a more comprehensive description of inherited (and, by implication, inherent) evil.
[20] Undertaken in accord with the Oedipal brothers' power-sharing pact. See below.
[21] See line I.140. The sons' system stipulates alternate-year rule/exile.
[22] Statius, *Thebaid*, I.17-8.
[23] Statius, *Thebaid*, I.391.
[24] Statius, *Thebaid*, I.463-5.
[25] See also p. 29 for Tydeus' crime.
[26] Statius, *Thebaid*, I.465

of his fate, he [becomes] loath to name his father".[27] Adrastus cuts in and offers an easy out, urging the two travelers to relax and be at ease, but Polynices' unfinished statement hangs in the air for the poem's next two hundred lines.[28] After a brief narrative interlude, the discussion continues, its tension heightened by an ostensibly irrelevant tangent. Adrastus concludes his impromptu account of Argos' ritual history, relating that the travelers' arrival is "[an honor] renewed, / [which] cheers Phoebus' shrines." But the king's praise is not without question. "These altars you choose to visit," he continues, "...ah, whose offspring? [...] Oeneus of Cydeus, did you say? [...] But tell me who *you* are, our other visitor to Argos—these are the hours for conversation."[29]

With these freighted lines Adrastus cuts to the crux of the *Thebaid*'s central debate. Polynices, true to type, "duck[s] his head and grimly stare[s] out at the ground; silent, he cut[s] his eyes sidelong at [...] Tydeus.

> After a lengthy pause, he was moved to say:
> 'You
> shouldn't ask me, here, among these divine honors,
> where I come from, what land's mine, what rank of ancient blood
> flows in my veins. I shrink to tell it amidst holy rites.
> But, if your need to know my wretched fate is pressing,
> Cadmus sired my line, my land is bellicose Thebes,
> my mother's Jocasta.[30]

And so the secret is revealed. Unlike (Statius') Oedipus, Polynices is both acutely aware and acutely ashamed of his past, flooded with self-conscious guilt for the crime his father committed in ignorance and ignominy. If Statius' presentation of Tydeus and Oedipus serves to question or complicate the determinism of the *Thebaid*'s mythical source material, Polynices' self-projection appears to be a voicing of its conventional core. But the presence of this conservative construction does not negate the poem's more innovative aspects—and Polynices' dour admission is not left unanswered.

Tydeus' introduction invokes an optimistic understanding of individual agency; Oedipus' is idiosyncratic but unhopeful;[31] and Polynices' self-pity provides insight into a view both dark and deterministic. If this were the extent of Statius' equation, the weight of opinion would tend towards an unfortunate answer. Happily, however, Adrastus' response to the admission he provoked includes an elaboration of Tydeus'

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[27] Statius, *Thebaid*, I.466-7. Polynices views his past as an (if not *behaviorally* determinative) unavoidable reputational reality.
[28] The real root of the matter is not evident until line 673.
[29] Statius, *Thebaid*, I.667-72.
[30] Statius, *Thebaid*, I.125.
[31] In the *Thebaid*. 'Idiosyncratic' as in particular, personal.

more optimistic perspective. To Adrastus, it is not one's past (personal or ancestral) that matters but rather the actions one *chooses* to take. After Polynices speaks, the Argive ruler retorts:

> Why hide what's news to no-one? [...] Your
> kingdom, its madness, the gouged-out eyes—
> why, the men who shiver beneath [...] Arctic sun know
> *that*! [...] Stop whining and telling over as yours
> the woes of your forebears! In our house too, duty was much
> neglected, and yet, guilt stands in no descendant's way.
> You need only be unlike your kin—with luck you may win
> the right to redeem them.[32]

In Adrastus' eyes, invocations of inherited guilt are not only irrelevant but self-indulgent, perhaps dangerous. To allow the past to dictate the path of the present is to entertain an irresponsible exercise in self-fulfilling 'fate'. For the Argive king, predetermined evildoing is both oxymoron and excuse: "stop whining", he tells Polynices, for "guilt stands in no descendant's way". And while this injunction is ultimately expressed in hospitable, optimistic terms, its implied inverse is grim indeed. Agency allows both good and evil; the automatic ethical separation between father and family which Adrastus advocates permits agency to devolve upon the individual—for good or for worse.[33]

2. DIVINE DECISION AND DISSENTING VOICES

Statius' gods are not silent on these central questions. After an authorial break in which the poet describes the means and results of Polynices' and Eteocles' power-sharing agreement,[34] the *Thebaid*'s narrative shifts its gaze towards events of another scale.[35] "Now, summoned by Jove," in the heavens' "revolving high dome," the "Assembly of Gods, gathered in council," comes to order. On the docket are issues parallel to those discussed in Argos' earthly court: Jupiter, angered by humankind's capricious deeds, complains "of Earth's offenses, of human nature / that craves ever more revenge".[36] His solution to this perceived problem of inherited wrath and intergenerational retribution is not to ease his own load but to expurgate every last element of guilt. Despite his claim that '[h]uman nature [...] never changes," this god is bent on a revolutionary solution.[37] In order to ensure that any remaining traces of Oedipal iniquity are fully and finally addressed, Jupiter proposes to "pull up the whole deadly race by the roots".[38] At bar are

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[32] Statius, *Thebaid*, I.684-90.
[33] This aspect of ethical independence will be addressed further in sections 4 and 5 below.
[34] "[Q]uick-switch terms", in his words. See note 34.
[35] Statius, *Thebaid*, I.140.
[36] Statius, *Thebaid*, I.214.
[37] The irony of Jupiter's complaint, as will shortly be seen, is not lost on his interlocutors.
[38] Statius, *Thebaid*, I.242-3.

not only the fates of Oedipus' sons, Eteocles and Polynices, but the future of Thebes—and, it appears, the well-being of Argos and its hospitable king.[39] "Let Adrastus as father-in-law, / let his daughter joined in ill-omened wedlock serve me as seeds of war", Jupiter continues. The wrathful god argues a slippery slope; in this passage it is not only individual agents but families, bloodlines, cities, and even *peoples* who must pay for the deeds of their fellow men. This overwhelming ire is so expansive, so all-encompassing that the landscape itself is rendered suspect.[40]

Jupiter's obsessive grudge is a curiously personal object to find at the core of such a comprehensive and impactful moral argument. And, as the goddess Juno makes clear in a biting rejoinder to this impetuous announcement, her husband's fickle emotional logic is not limited to these lines.

Speaking in the spirit of Adrastus, Juno replies to Jupiter's monologue by invoking her own theory of guilt and retribution. Jupiter himself, she notes, is no unworldly innocent—and after listing a number of relevant transgressions (lines I.250-255), the goddess meets her partner's madness with a reasoned sort of response. "Lies," she says, "[l]ies and affairs [are] forgotten." As for Thebes: "I loathe it. [...] Let Thebes pay for her deeds, *but why make Argos her foe*?"[41] Juno's personal allegiances are not irrelevant—Argos is *her* city—but the core of this argument contains a more systemic, universalizable reply to Jupiter's impractical, illogical, and arbitrary scheme of retribution. If modern nations are to answer for every transgression since the beginning of time, if civilizations must "atone primeval, ancestral crimes, [...] how far back must / you go to purge Earth of madness, to redress the wrongs / of bygone times?"[42] The obvious impracticality of Jupiter's logic when taken by Juno to its natural conclusion highlights the capriciousness which is its true cause. Juno does not advocate for *unearned* forgiveness—her answer to the Theban question is clear—but rather a more reasoned, tailored approach to human crime and tragedy. "Turn aside the turmoil of war", she tells Jupiter, "and show your clan compassion".[43] Punish those deserving, and stop the cycle there.

While the surface-level logic of this divine discussion pertains more to punishment than to agency, its implications are intimately interwoven into the epic's larger questions. The debate's theoretical foundations, the justifications implicit within each god's arguments, operate upon the same foundations as

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[39] Who will become a part of Oedipus' lineage by marriage; see lines II.134-305.
[40] See (Book I) lines 241-2. See also III.239-52 (Jupiter speaking): "If you object to my making this generation pay / for crimes of old, to my punishing these dire grandsons, then, / by this eternal citadel, [...] I swear / with my own hand I'll shake Thebes off her foundations and shatter / her walls, strewn Inachian rooftops with towers torn / from the ground—or else, with my downpours, I'll sweep them all / into sky-blue waves..." Not even the netherworld eludes his attention: "it is further decreed," the god announces, "that the clan of Tantalus too shall have punishment, for, deep within / my breast, that traitor's savage banquet rankles yet" (I.245-7)
[41] Statius, *Thebaid*, I. 256-9. Emphasis mine.
[42] Statius, *Thebaid*, I.266-9.
[43] Statius, *Thebaid*, 280-1.

do the approaches of Tydeus, Adrastus, and Polynices. And this episode's larger compositional effect—to cast a suspicious shadow upon frameworks of 'fate'—adds another angle to the ambiguous unease first elicited by Statius' depiction of an angry Oedipus.

When understood in light of the concurrent conversation at Argos, then, this celestial exchange becomes indicative of a larger narrative pattern. The reader is treated to two debates with twin issues at their core: for Argos, the import and impact of inherited culpability; for Olympus, the ethics and practice of punishment based upon that very principle. From these parallel discussions emerges a cast of characters allied with two increasingly well-defined conceptual (and practical, and moral) positions. On one side are Adrastus, Tydeus, and Juno; on the other, Jupiter and—though equivocal—Polynices.[44] For Adrastus, familial sins do not the present make; for Tydeus, one's past is not determinative of one's future; for Juno, inflexible precepts of 'contagious' culpability are both immoral and impractical; and for Jupiter and Polynices, inherited history is an inescapable influence.

Dissenting voices clash with their more pessimistic counterparts, creating a cosmos-spanning debate between individual agency, familial history, and transmitted guilt.[45] While these two intra-epic conversations exist apart within the poem, the progression of Statius' narrative acts to place Adrastus (& co.), Jupiter (& co.), and the opinions they represent into interactive dialog. Though Adrastus and Jupiter do not meet face-to-face within these early books, the *Thebaid*'s thematic structure locates the Argive's argument squarely within the terms of Jupiter/Juno's divine dispute. This understanding lends fresh import to Jupiter's invocation of Adrastus at line 243: the god's cruel decision to "[make] Adrastus serve [him] / as seeds of war" appears ever more hostile and ironic, as though these two critical figures and their contrasting approaches were in active exchange.

It might, in light of his compositional effect, be convincingly claimed that Jupiter should be grouped—against his own will—with Statius' cohort of dissenting voices.[46] The god wields outsized influence in the trajectory of 'fate', as it appears, and yet he is petty and impetuous: his character's larger literary role acts to undercut the reader's confidence in unmoving destiny and divine determination. (Likewise with Oedipus. Unlike Tydeus, the Theban cannot extricate himself from his historical wrongdoing, and yet his characterization by Statius as aware and angry[47] lends itself to a heightened perception of individual

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[44] Statius' discussion of Oedipus contains elements at home in both camps; for his later (and much less ambiguous) use of Oedipus' character, see VIII.242, where the Theban is seen to enjoy his exile: "Oedipus came, his countenance calm, / while locks blackened with grime no more, matted and filthy hair / cleared from his face; he accepted genial speeches. . ." See also Book HG, where Oedipus is portrayed as an exemplar of schadenfreude: in order to better witness the carnage, he rescinds his (here, not even genuine) penitential deed and declares that *he wants his eyes back*.
[45] And, hence, a meta-discussion of mythic precedent and authorial independence. See below.
[46] Albeit against the grain of his own personal opinions.
[47] As opposed to Apollodorus' ignorant, unknowing, largely tragic figure. See section 1 above; see also section 4 below.

culpability.) It is apparent, then, that the divine debate in Book I's early lines is more complex than it may first appear. If nothing else, its import extends beyond the interpersonal squabbles of Juno and Jupiter. As with Statius' opening elaboration of the Oedipus tale, various plot-points which may initially signal orthodoxy, tradition, and a buy-in to the tenets of predestination are expanded to include an array of alternative options.

Through these passages, perspectives, questions, and comments, the determinative power of inherited destiny is made mutable. And it is not merely a disorganized set of opposing points but an *alternate framework* of justice which is introduced to replace Jupiter's ailing explanation. When considered alongside Adrastus' and Tydeus' progressive perspectives, Juno's proposal for a more manageable praxis of punishment provides a reasonably cohesive blueprint for action—one which has, unlike Jupiter's, the benefits of possibility, plausibility, and practicality.

3. THE QUESTION OF CONTAGION

Thus far, this elaboration of increasingly expansive viewpoints has served to add new angles—opinions, rationales, points of discordance or departure—to a core of conventional mythology. Various elements of narrative independence have been addressed: Statius' choice of scale; his disquieting depiction of Oedipus; his introduction of dissenting voices; his efforts to place these perspectives into thematic dialog; and, finally, his implied invitation for readers to combine allied arguments into a compound system. What else might signal the presence of a substantial, systematic Statian thesis?

It is possible to argue for the presence of a fully-fledged ethical vision solely on the basis of Juno's bid and its dialectic parallels. The questions raised by the goddess and her Argive associates are incisive enough to problematize what might otherwise appear to be entirely traditional narrative features, elements which invest, ostensibly, in a morality of blame. And yet this still is not the full extent of Statius' game.

A more comprehensive inquiry into the *Thebaid*'s ethical arena demands—indeed—an extended exploration of moral *means*. Apparent within the statements of Jupiter and Juno alike are a set of competing conceptions which apply not just to Polynices' present-day guilt but to the theory, the mechanisms, which enable guilt's transmission.

The perspectives of Tydeus, Polynices, Adrastus, Jupiter, and Juno are not presented without rationale (however incidental or informal). Polynices, the second to speak, offers up what is to him both an internal/psychological and an external/societal truth: blame is bequeathed, if not by blood, then at least by association or reputation.[48] For Adrastus and Tydeus, intergenerational guilt cannot be inherited in any meaningful manner unless the 'receiving' party creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. Jupiter's bitter point builds upon Polynices' claim, expanding the principle of association well beyond kinship/blood; and Juno's response is as opposed (to her husband's, that is) as can possibly be.

To this collection of moral modes may be added the principle of contagion. Jupiter's condemnatory view, already indicative of a 'pollution'-based understanding at line I.215, expands to include not only Thebes but Argos, Greece, the land itself. For this bellicose deity, the Argives (now associated with Polynices) represent the necessary second half in a pre-planned war set in motion so that the Earth may be cleansed of *all* her children's sin.[49]

In Statius' tale, the 'infection' of Argos also involves transmission via kinship. Ill-omened marriage is never far from the 'fates' of the Oedipal line, and Polynices' marriage to Adrastus' daughter at I.230 cements this connection. But agency too is not absent within an Argive arena: Thebes-Argos conflict is indeed understood throughout the *Thebaid* to be backed by Jupiter (his monologue makes as much clear), although the influence of divine decision is also accompanied by some space for independent action.[50] The Argives choose war in the face—*in spite of*—perilous portents.[51]

A full explanation of this unexpected event involves the introduction of another character at home in Statius' cast of dissenting voices: Capaneus.

After the possibility of conflict between Thebes and Argos becomes undeniable, King Adrastus calls upon a prophet, Amphiaraus, to render his verdict on the nation's options.[52] Amphiaraus' message is short and simple:[53] often has the seer "attained omens of variable Phoebus [Apollo]", but "never before ha[s he] observed terrors like these or planets more baneful—and [...] still [...] worse is in store".[54] The evidence in favor of inaction is overwhelming, and yet not everyone is convinced. Among the Argive audience is the warrior Capaneus, a spirited soldier unwilling to abet his city's apprehensive chorus. "What's this cowardice, [...] O Achaeans of kindred blood?" he thunders.[55]

> At the door of a citizen, one ordinary man, shall we hang fire—

[48] Think again of his shame.
[49] Ostensibly. As Juno's comments make abundantly clear, Jupiter's reasons are often more petty than they might appear.
[50] And problematized by Jupiter's inconstancy. See above.
[51] Conceptions of contagion can (thus) coexist with the possibility of agency. As addressed above, the *Thebaid* is neither conclusive nor univalent; many voices exist within its bounds, and a reckoning of their varying valuations requires ever deeper examination.
[52] Aggression or acquiescence.
[53] Although his prognostic process is not... and is much elaborated within the text. (Its description spans approx. lines III.440 to III.645.)
[54] Statius, *Thebaid*, III.517-23.
[55] Statius, *Thebaid*, III.608-9.

> a host keyed up with all our iron strapped on? [...]
> Wait till some pallid spinster mutters
> weird ambiguities? Courage is *my* God—also, this sword here in my hand![56]

Why wait?, Capaneus asks. Prophecy is an empty excuse, a rationale used by the fearful to delay or deny action (and hence responsibility).[57] Even the gods themselves cannot escape his scorn: it was human fear, he contends, which created them.[58]

Capaneus' statements are striking in their blasphemousness, but the unqualified wrath of this fighter's diatribe can obscure its conceptual ties with the perspectives of Juno, Tydeus, and Adrastus. Indeed, Capaneus' speech contributes another important element to these already-robust arguments for agency. To Adrastus' and Tydeus' rejection of inherited guilt is now added (yet) another negation of destiny *as well as* a wholesale denial of divinity's power.[59]

Statius' many advocates of individuality are so resistant to archetypal characterization that it can be challenging to organize their respective sentiments into a coherent whole expansive enough to include Capaneus. Our project can, however, be aided by a more generous perspective on Capaneus himself. As becomes increasingly apparent, boisterous rage is not the full extent of this soldier's action-oriented argument. The warrior's wrath is as much a rejection of injustice as Juno's, and—what is more—is not merely blasphemous, reactionary, or negatory. Capaneus' message includes a direct *and* principled revolt against the prospect of prophecy as a tool for moral reckoning.[60]

Indeed, it is evident that Capaneus' speech contains the seeds of an ethical synthesis as potent, if not as comprehensive, as that formed by Juno, Tydeus, and Adrastus. (Further discussion of Capaneus' behavioral beliefs can be found in section 5 below). But despite this warrior's pointed position on the question of individual agency, the ethical status of his adopted nation remains hazy.[61] Capaneus is the paragon, the paradigm of individual action at Argos, but the specter of moral contagion invoked by

[56] Statius, *Thebaid*, III.608-14.
[57] Note the ties to Adrastus' earlier speech.
[58] Statius, *Thebaid*, III.660-1. Also cf. Juno's disgust. While she would by no means deny Jupiter's existence, the emotional tone of both characters' interjections are almost evenly matched. So too is the emphasis on individual responsibility.
[59] I.e., a rejection of one of the powers which drives said 'destiny'. (Jupiter's characterization contributes to this point.) Godless, materialistic conceptions of Statius' universe leave no room for fate.
(See section 5 below for a discussion of the *Thebaid*'s ties to Lucan's *Civil War*, an epic even more explicit in its nonbelief.)
[60] In effect an outsourcing of both the effort and blame for critical decision-making to the heavens above... heavens which are, to Capaneus, nonexistent (and to the reader, in light of Jupiter's unsympathetic characterization in Book I, no less capricious than their human alternative).
[61] It could be argued here that a *city* joins Statius' collection of conventional and dissenting voices. Argos' collective opinions are one aspect of this episode which correspond to traditional conceptions of 'contagious' guilt.

Jupiter (a contagion transmitted via Polynices' presence) cannot be dispelled by his efforts alone.[62] For Jupiter himself the *polis* is polluted in spite of any (additional, ostensible) original action;[63] no matter her impetus, Argos' decision to join the war is merely the fulfilment of Jupiter's wrathful wish.[64] In this light, the city's moral trajectory operates upon a basis tied both with the mechanics of individual initiative *and* inevitable or inheritable outcomes. Each side of the larger agency/inheritance equation can claim a powerful Statian character as champion, but the position of Argos within this binary framework remains unclear.

There is as yet no preponderance of proof by which one might pinpoint Statius' underlying philosophical sympathies. Our poet's game thus far has involved the introduction of figures, voices, and thematic motifs which both buttress and undermine the fatalistic narrative determinism associated with his ancient source material. This raising of questions is itself indicative, but any convincing authorial synthesis must be accompanied by a more thorough inquiry into the *Thebaid*'s interaction with mythical tradition. And a reliable read on the moral status of Argos—a conclusive answer to the question of contagion—demands yet another analysis: that of character.[65]

4. GREEK PRECEDENT AND CONDEMNATION BY CONTRAST

Statius' depiction of his 'seven against Thebes', that cohort of Argive champions dispatched to fulfil both Zeus' and Capaneus' wishes in the war against Eteocles, invites intertextual interpretation. The poet's presentation of this character collection is quite condensed, and occurs (very conveniently) in two primary locations: Book IV and Book VI.

Book IV marks the reader's first sight of Argos' superlative crew. At line 38 "Grim king / ADRASTUS" is introduced once again, this time as a man distinguished both by age (he is "[sick] with weighty cares, closer to years / of decline") and by bravery. His personal reluctance and physical frailty are easily overmatched by a powerful sense of civic obligation, and the elderly ruler marches once more off to battle.[66] Polynices, for whose sake "[the Argives] favor war", is presented as a figure simultaneously sympathetic—"even volunteers from home [were] moved by his exile"—and powerful, engaged and

[62] The warrior's argument eventually proves convincing, but it is well to remember that Capaneus as first introduced is an *exceptional* individual doing battle with a majority opinion.
[63] I.e., even if Capaneus' argument prevails...
[64] Indeed a wish which practically opens the tale—chronoligically, the divine debate precedes Polynices' pessimism.
[65] An accounting of Statius' tone towards the actors which embody his epic's opposing opinions can help provide evidence of *intent*—evidence which is sorely lacking throughout the *Thebaid*'s early lines.
[66] For this hesitance, see. III.386.

righteous, just in his mission.[67] Tydeus too is "hale and hearty", and the case is the same for Hippomedon, a moral leader whose troops are "led [well] and taught to love / goodly Valor".[68] Capaneus is wrathful and robust: "long-waisted, broad-chested, he's sheathed in steel from Chalybes".[69] Amphiaraus, uneasy company for Capaneus, is nevertheless willing to fight; despite his attempts to deny the inevitable, the seer proceeds apace. And the final hero, Parthenopaeus, is only a boy—but brave, "[b]lazing", nonetheless. Prominent in this list of characters and characteristics is a focus on capacity, capability, dutifulness, independence, and even knowing self-sacrifice.[70]

Similar emphases are evident in Book VI, but here the specter of war grows ever closer. Funeral games for a lost infant provide another opportunity for Statius to display his heroes' combative capabilities, but in Book VI these exhibitions are interlaced with a dread that surpasses even that expected species of grief directed towards the deceased. Readers are repeatedly reminded that these exercises have a double purpose: honoring the dead and preparing for war. ("Boxing", as reads line 730, is "the closest thing to warfare and steel".) But the most obvious omen is saved for the book's final lines. The champions' award ceremony is marked and marred by an arrow that behaves as if possessed:

> The fateful shaft measured the plain in a flash, tapped the tree
> and—horrible sight—*came back* through air it had just now
> traversed, turning away from the target and holding its course
> till it fell next to the mouth of the well-known quiver.[71]

Such evil omens act to highlight, by contrast, the liveliness and virtue of Argos' fighting men. But the relevance of contrast as a compositional technique is not limited to this construction of character versus context—or even to features contained within the *Thebaid* itself.

Book VI's 'parade' of heroes compresses a significant amount of description into only a few hundred lines. Each episode's compact yet comprehensive nature invites comparison between Statius' account and that of his mythical sources. And while Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* contains no sequence exactly akin to Book IV's rolling list, the descriptive parallels (and divergences) apparent between each text are easily

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[67] Statius, *Thebaid*, III.87 and 85-6. For his power, see especially line 86: a "Teumesian lionskin mantled / his back, and two steel-tipped javelins caught the light".
[68] III. 96 and 128-9.
[69] Statius, *Thebaid*, IV. 173-4.
[70] Amphiaraus' case is especially notable for this reason, as is the plight of young Parthenopaeus' worried mother (see IV.247-259). Capaneus also pulls more than his own weight in the category of 'independence'. (This last attribute will be discussed in section 5.)
[71] Statius, *Thebaid*, VI.938-41.

identified.[72] Where Statius' champions are sympathetic, independent, and dutiful, Aeschylus' are dark and polluted, defined by their desperation and unhappy destiny.

The Greek's take on Tydeus is not sprightly but rather impious:

> raving and gluttonous for battle,
> [he] bellows like a chimera in noonday clangor.
> He abuses and berates Apollo's priest. . .[73]

Capaneus is "a grotesque exaggeration" of Tydeus' impiety, a "new breed of giant," "haughty" and "terrible".[74] Hippomedon's distinguishing characteristics are his "blood-glee" and association with a monster glossed as "the universal tomb".[75] Parthenopaeus is indeed beautiful but also (and perhaps primarily) "savage-minded": he "puts violence, military glory, and ambition" above piety and civic virtue.[76]

Aeschylus' Amphiaraus is the champion closest to Statius' imagining, although his "refusal to attack [Thebes]" acts to emphasize a concern for self not at all evident in the Roman's rendering.[77] Polynices is as depraved as his brother; at line 788 he declares in quite sexual terms that he will "scale and bestride [Thebes'] walls, / proclaimed lord and subjugator of the land." (Gone is the focus on good rule which serves to justify Polynices' cause in the *Thebaid.* See below.)

Most notable among these shifts, however, is the replacement of Adrastus with an "arrogant" soldier named 'Eteoklos'.[78] Statius' paradigmatic advocate of agency disappears and is replaced by a warrior whose very name brings his and his colleagues' characterizations ever closer to that of Thebes. This example is, indeed, indicative of a larger pattern in Aeschylus' work; here, Thebes and Argos are irredeemably contaminated, equally perverted, 'Thebanized' to such an extent that their fighters mirror each other in both deed and name.[79] These 'champions' are not only inadequate and immoral but almost indistinguishable from their enemies.

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[72] Apollodorus' *Library of Greek Mythology* is less helpful in this instance. Its accounting of the seven champions is so summary as to preclude characterization.
[73] Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes*, trans. Anthony Hecht and Helen H. Bacon (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1973), 463-5.
[74] Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*, p.11 lines 523, 540, and 525.
[75] Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*, p. 11 and line 613.
[76] Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*, 12.
[77] Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*, 12.
[78] Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*, 573.
[79] As the translators to the cited text note in their general introduction, Aeschylus' twin sets of soldiers are described in such a manner than their foibles and hypocrisies illuminate each other. See pp. 10-3. Polynices' choice to equate himself with his brother at line 793 only adds to this sense of interchangeable (and fundamentally familial) guilt.

The rashness of Aeschylus' warriors is especially striking when contrasted against one particular Statian fact: three years of debate and indecision pass between the events of Book III and the beginning of Book IV, where the Argive war march finally begins.[80] This prudent period of consideration, as much as the Statian heroes' more humane traits, serves to separate these Argive individuals from their Theban (and, hence, Aeschylean) counterparts.[81] The Greek author's champions are obviously unsympathetic; Statius' are not only different from them *but better.* These fighters' collective morality is elevated against that of both their Theban (but still Statian) counterparts and their analogues in Aeschylus' play.[82]

It thus becomes increasingly untenable to apply models of pollution or contagion to Statius' Argives. Contagion as a concept is not absent from the epic; Aeschylus' 'infection' model is rejected in the Argive example, but its precepts are applied and believed by Eteocles and his Thebans almost without question.[83] Regarding Argos, however, this system appears at odds with Statius' own national sympathies. For the interpretation of Aeschylus' Argives, a framework of ever-spreading guilt may well apply; but for an analysis of the Roman poem, universal 'pollution' is no longer a viable model.[84]

This divergence has a distinctly moral function. At their core, contrasts between the *Thebaid* and its sources ultimately allow Statius to condemn his Thebans and their 'cursed' context. Departure from literary precedent permits the poet to depict his two Oedipal 'teams' in disparate terms; the virtue, independence, and ability of his Adrastean heroes redounds negatively upon the weakness and malevolence of both Aeschylus' Argives and Statius' own downtrodden Thebans.[85]

Questions of contrast also call for a renewed interpretation of one individual housed within the class of clashing voices introduced at this study's outset. Adrastus' initial position,[86] which is originally presented as a hopeful or optimistic option (as it is for Polynices), is complicated by these darker considerations. When applied to those characters willing to exercise individual agency it is indeed encouraging,[87] but the precept's presence within the text also opens a door to ethical condemnation—that is, condemnation by contrast. Aeschylus' champions and Statius' Thebans alike fail the test of independence, and their shortcomings become ever more apparent when viewed through the lens of ethical opportunity

[80] See Statius, *Thebaid*, p. 83.
[81] Contrasts between certain Argives and Thebans will be discussed further in section 5 below.
[82] Again: for these 'Statian analogues' (the Thebans) see section 5.
[83] See section 5. As becomes increasingly apparent, this uncritical acceptance of a regressive, oddly exculpatory system of morality speaks poorly of the Thebans' collective character. (...However ironic that may be. The 'contagion' model is invalid except where it is unthinkingly accepted!)
[84] Or exegetical scaffold.
[85] Despite the still-muddied waters surrounding Argos' actions, this contrast makes as much all but crystal clear. See section 5 below for an expansion upon this point.
[86] 'Pro' agency, as it were. See section 1 above.
[87] And, compositionally speaking, serves to uplift those actors who follow its tenets to positive effect.

established in the epic's early lines.[88] These characters' states of guilt and shame are rendered even more reprehensible by the knowledge that escape or independence is indeed possible.

The *Thebaid*'s introduction of dissenting perspectives and disquieting figures, then, invokes a progressive conception of culpability that is subsequently borne out by its author's treatment of his own 'seven against Thebes'.[89] This reality implies an answer to the problem of Argive 'contagion', but it also reflects back upon *this* study's inquiry into authorial allegiance. While the case is by no means closed, what indications are apparent thus far imply a preference for those characters willing to make their own moral way. Unlike Aeschylus, Statius allows his Argives some sincere sympathy—but that is far from the case for his Thebans.

5. MORAL CONTENT: CAPANEUS, CATO, AND ETEOCLES' EVIL

Comparative elevation and condemnation by contrast are not limited to such specific situations. Statius' use of ethical juxtaposition applies to his descriptions of Argive liveliness as opposed to grim omen (Book VI), his depictions of Argives and Thebans, his introduction of dissenting and conventional voices, and even his more granular linguistic choices. But the function of this literary tool is not merely 'anti-Theban' or 'pro-independence': its application is not absent more particular ethical implications. As addressed above, the poet's elevation of his Argive warriors is not without qualitative (and perhaps prescriptive) moral implications. A series of very specific traits encompassing everything from martial skill to intellectual independence are lauded in heroic terms.[90]

In order to more fully explore the contents of this still-hazy construction—that is, in order to uncover the substance of Statius' moral framework—it is necessary to turn once again towards the character of Capaneus. In concert with this intimate investigation will be added an accounting of another individual from another parallel source: the statesman Cato as portrayed in Lucan's *Civil War*. It is here that Statius' discussion of personal traits and ethical possibilities gains its proper literary-historical context.[91]

The vague but positive moral valence that the *Thebaid* assigns to individual initiative is not trumped by the presence of immoral actors,[92] but neither can this valuation be considered complete or coherent on its own. Fortunately, Statius' promotion of election and autonomy is not the measure of the matter. As is

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[88] See section 5 for an accounting of Theban failure.
[89] (And, in inverse, by his villains. Think again of Jupiter in light of Juno's speech.)
[90] Pun intended.
[91] This is a fine-grained, high-resolution endeavor which is fundamentally enabled by the poet's original act of calibration. Refer again to section 1.
[92] That is, immoral *independent* actors.

already apparent, the poet's tendency to associate his sympathetic characters with independence also involves a more fine-grained accounting of their positive traits. Indeed, the 'condemnation by contrast' invoked above is ultimately effective because Argos' seven heroes are not merely individual agents but *exemplary* ones. None of these champions' characterizations are anywhere as detailed, however, as that of Capaneus.

Capaneus' morality entails a dramatic rejection of both divinity and destiny.[93] In Statius' words: "having far outstripped his forebears' deeds, he scorned the Gods and got away with it".[94] But this negation of heavenly power is by no means nihilistic; into the void of his belief Capaneus pours himself. For the angry Argive, inaction is untenable, and this reality is communicated in no uncertain terms.[95] A rejection of fate and fortune is met with the belief that *one must make one's own*. True virtue is not externally imposed but rather *created*. Prophetic knowledge, Capaneus implies, is only unnecessary if one's heart and hand are driven by the proper precepts.[96]

This multifaceted focus on an ethics of individual action is also evident in Lucan's portrait of Cato's character. While this statesman's epic of origin (the *Pharsalia* or *Civil War*) differs significantly from the *Thebaid* in both plot and orientation,[97] the scaffolding of Lucan's work has much in common with its Statian counterpart. As is true of the *Thebaid*, the *Civil War*'s divine machinery is unconventional, and its most moral characters tend towards ethical independence.[98] It is not departure or distance (as with Apollodorus and Aeschylus) which is of interest here but rather compositional *proximity*, the proximity of two texts which existed in near-contemporaneous conversation.[99]

Cato's role contains the most precise parallels between these twinned Roman poems. Like Statius' Capaneus, Lucan's Cato is self-sacrificing, courageous, virtuous, independent; he is clear in his rejection of prophecy, predestination, fate, and fortune. His adherence to Adrastean morals is all but impeccable,

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[93] See section 3 for an initial introduction to this system.
[94] Statius, *Thebaid*, III. 661-2. The author's emphasis on an escape from ancestry is especially relevant in light of the arguments proposed by Adrastus and Tydeus. See section 1 above.
[95] To recap: "Courage," shouts Capaneus, "is my God—also, this sword here in my hand!" Statius, *Thebaid*, III.615-6.
[96] And wield the requisite weapons. For 'precepts', see: independence, courage, an openness to self-sacrifice, etc. The warrior's singularity thus implies a positive framework for ethical praxis, a personal/particular reckoning of human responsibility.
(Statius himself takes a negative stance on the matter of prophecy. In an authorial interjection between lines III.551-65 he consigns a "passion to know the future" to the category of "universal sickness[es]".)
[97] The *Thebaid* is mythical while *Pharsalia* is 'historical', recounting as it does the events of Rome's first century civil strife.
[98] See also section 2 of this study. In this instance, 'unconventional' means 'absent'.
[99] Statius and Lucan were close contemporaries with a working, if unidirectional, literary relationship. As Statius wrote in his ode to Lucan's widow (*Silvae* II.vii.1-135), his fellow-Roman's work was more than masterful. The admiration (and, as one supposes, moral affinity?) between the two—as well as their shared cultural context, occupation, perhaps aim—makes the *Civil War* an informative source for Statius' own outlook. See Publius Papinius Statius and J. H. Mozley, *Statius* (London: William Heineman LTD, 1928), 129-36.

and out of the many powerful men in Lucan's epic it is Cato's characterization which is the most superlative.

Lucan's Cato is unselfish—"[i]n warfare," the poet declares, "he did nothing for himself"—and acts for a cause larger than his own.[100] The "creed

> of austere Cato [was] to hold to the goal,
> [...] to devote his life to his country,
> to believe himself born not for himself but for all the world [...];
> for Rome he is keeper of justice and guardian of strict morality.[101]

But the most salient aspect of Cato's moral fibre is his determination to act in spite of fate. Faced with the near-certain prospect of a fallen fatherland, this outstanding individual declares that he

> will not be torn away
> before embracing your lifeless body, Rome; and Liberty,
> your name, [...] I shall follow all the way.[102]

Both Cato and Capaneus eschew destiny in favor of agency or independence, and both populate that evacuated space with productive conceptions of just action. Apparent in their respective credos are an adherence to the systems proposed by Adrastus, Tydeus, and Juno, along with a more elaborated understanding of what ends those precepts might be employed to approach. Likewise with Statius: onto the newly cleared canvas of authorial invention are painted characters with fully-fleshed moral ideologies. These men are not lone wolves out only to blaspheme and benefit themselves.[103]

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With the possibility of idiosyncratic virtue comes its inverse. This presence of ethical actors both independent and benevolent functions in the *Thebaid* and the *Civil War* alike to render their alternative increasingly unpalatable. For Lucan, this eventuality is realized in the character of Julius Caesar; for Statius, Eteocles and his Thebans inhabit Caesar's unsavory role. Lucan's Caesar is both proud of his evil and aware of its independent origin (like Capaneus, he follows the fortune he alone makes, a fact which renders his depravity all the more unconscionable)—but each poet's insistence on the possibility of

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[100] Lucan and Susanna Morton Braund, *Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), IX.27.
[101] Lucan, *Civil War*, II.380-9. See also p. 32, 29, l.200.
[102] Lucan, *Civil War*, II.301-3. See also IX.27-30.
[103] (This collection of more detailed characterizations also adds weight to Statius treatment of his Argive champions.) The moral content of agency/independence becomes ever more visible.

independent benevolence also serves to undermine the fate-based excuses of those characters who hide behind inherited sin.[104]

Statius' take on Tydeus in his capacity as emissary to Thebes is a telling addition to this moralizing mode. The Calydonian's place among Statius' cast of dissenting characters—already well established by Tydeus' shameless self-introduction in Book 1—is solidified within this later episode. Before the Argive decision to wage war is truly and irrevocably made, "bold" Tydeus, "proven friend in adventure, proven partner" is selected by Adrastus to "[t]est / [Eteocles'] good faith and diplomatically put [i.e., argue] the case" for Polynices' return to rule under the power-sharing agreement outlined above.[105] Through "rugged road[s]" and "hateful waters" travels the intrepid emissary with his message of righteous rule, ever onward until he "reaches Teumesian acres / and Agenor's acropolis".[106] It is here that Tydeus (and Statius' readers) first lay eyes on Polynices' power-hungry brother, an individual who quickly becomes the *Thebaid*'s most pointed foil for the Argives' moral independence.

> There [Tydeus] spied harsh Eteocles
> high on his throne, hedged round with bristling spears; counter
> to law
> and beyond his time, well into his brother's reign, the brute
> was ruling his people with an iron hand. Ready for any
> crime, he sat complaining. . .[107]

He who *will not* shirk his 'inherited' guilt is all too willing to ignore present-day pacts.[108] Eteocles is unjust, avaricious, harsh, and cruel: he takes no pains to separate himself from the sins of the father. Apollodorus' Oedipus was unaware of his ill luck; Statius' is more malevolent; but Eteocles easily takes the cake for willing, knowing, and voluntary—if Adrastus' argument is to be believed—depravity.[109]

Tydeus' character is automatically contrasted against this ugly image thanks to his allegiance with Argos, but his own internal convictions are by no means irrelevant.[110] Eteocles' actions are tied intimately with

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[104] For Caesar's independence, see (*Civil War*) I.225. For his depravity, see IX.1040—only one of many unflattering examples.
It is, indeed, the characteristically Statian contrast between ideal and un-trying real (cf. Eteocles below) which drives this compositional effect... although the full power of that disparity is derived from or bolstered by both authors' decisions to allow readers access to a more detailed portrait of what exactly is involved in (un)ethical action.
[105] Statius, *Thebaid*, II.364-5. See section 1. This example of measured statesmanship (diplomatic effort under conditions of ostensibly inevitable war) reinforces section 4's discussion of Argive excellence.
[106] Statius, *Thebaid*, II.382-3.
[107] Statius, *Thebaid*, II.382-3. Note the relevance of Adrastus' original injunction against "whining"! (See section 1.)
[108] For the hypocrisy, cf. Jupiter.
[109] For Eteocles' wrongdoing as described by his own people, see III.207: "by an unjust king's / crime, we've lost these many pillars of our land—citizens, / blameless men." Aletês (the speaker here) is yet another dissenting voice in Statius' ever-growing catalogue. In condemning Eteocles he emphasizes his people's lack of responsibility for the crimes committed by their leader.
[110] Tydeus' original characterization also increases this depictive distance. See above.

ideas of inheritance: for him, immorality has its roots in the ancestral past. Tydeus, however, is a former fratricide so transformed by his self-imposed exile that his own personal history does not (to him) preclude ethical independence—that is, in the current moment.[111] And it is through this Thebes-Eteocles emissary episode that the Calydonian's Capaneus-like status is further confirmed.

After a disastrous discussion in which an outraged Tydeus declares Eteocles the only truly Oedipal son (lines II.462-67), Polynices' darker brother "contrives crimes of deceit" and sends "fifty men [...] in close ranks" to ambush Tydeus.[112] Against all odds, the Argive prevails, leaving only one man—Maon—alive. It is this individual who travels back to Thebes so that Eteocles might have word of his conspiracy's failure; and it is this individual who, in the very first lines of his condemnatory report, emphasizes Tydeus' victory over fate.[113]

"This hopeless soul", begins Maon, referring to himself. "This hopeless soul Tydeus presents to you, whether due to the will of the Gods, or Fate, or—something my anger owns with shame—to that fighter's unflinching force".[114] It is not to destiny but to agency and effort which Maon assigns his savior's extraordinary victory. And this admission of independent power is attended by a corresponding rebuke of the Theban king. "Never shall my lifeblood be shed by the likes of [Eteocles]", Maon declares. "[Y]ou'll not stab the heart great Tydeus left unharmed".[115]

> Here he himself
> cut speech short, sword over its hilt in his side."[116]

Tydeus' extraordinary independence is elevated, juxtaposed against Eteocles' evil by this very man—one who perishes in pursuit of his own extraordinary, independent choice.[117]

6. CONCLUSION

[111] For Tydeus' history, see section 1 above.
[112] Statius, *Thebaid*, II.482 and 493 respectively.
[113] In a double sense. Any 50:1 odds might well require a miracle to overcome, but 50:1 odds sanctioned both by Jupiter and by Eteocles' 'predestined' evil are especially formidable... and their downfall especially important.
[114] Statius, *Thebaid*, II.58-62.
[115] Statius, *Thebaid*, III.83-5.
[116] Statius, *Thebaid*, III.83-5. It is in this sense that Maon is one of Statius' dissenting voices, an objector not only to fate but to fate's dark and guilty embodiment: Eteocles.
[117] (I.e., suicide.) Here, both agency and the quality those actions undertaken with the aid of an independent will are once again on dramatic display... and Tydeus' (later) decision to endorse combat in the face of Argive inaction only furthers this point. Volunteering himself as the first victim, "Tydeus, mindful of righteous wrath," asks to be sent once again to "face the king" (lines VIII.538-40).

It is here that Statius' envisioning of an alternate morality reaches its vivid apex. Having introduced both conventional and progressive frameworks through the voices of various characters, the author adds his own unique behavioral valuations into the mix. What emerges is by no measures axiomatic,[118] and yet this twice-independent effort includes a significant elaboration upon Aeschylus' and Apollodorus' ethics of individual agency. Its precepts are not universal; the narrative door dragged open for the *Thebaid*'s characters begins to close in Books VII-X, where Tydeus is "predeceased by his honor" and Capaneus struck down for his impudent impiety. But the latitude established before Statius' arena snaps shut is significant indeed.[119]

Although the epic ends in preordained fashion, and although Adrastus' promise ultimately rings hollow, the space made by the king and his counterparts heightens the reader's sense of human possibility and responsibility alike. Even *if* the poem's larger framework is understood to preclude some types of compositional independence,[120] individual objections voiced all throughout the *Thebaid*'s first half allow for a realization of moral means.[121] Statius' window of authorial opportunity indeed wanes with Book VII, but this narrative nadir does not retroactively negate agency's existence. Polynices and Eteocles both perish with their swords at each other's throats, but for a while—just long enough for each city's divergent aims to emerge—courage really is Capaneus' God.[122]

[118] The *Thebaid*, after all, is no treatise.
[119] Statius, *Thebaid*, p. 201, VIII.751-676 and X.921-39. Possibility gives way to "a heavy, pervasive fog of despair", and Capaneus dies a martyr for his self-determined cause.
The Argives' 'divinity-induced' slaughter of helpless (sleeping) Thebans at X.266 is also relevant. See especially lines X.263-95.
[120] I.e., even allowing that Statius could not depart too drastically from the plot parameters dictated by his source material...
[121] A reality which modifies the ethical implications of even those narrative events made immovable due to inherited literary necessity!
[122] And Juno's, and Tydeus', and Polynices'. Nor can the seven heroes be forgotten.

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